

TITLE

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Book Review

The Ethics of Pregnancy, Abortion and Childbirth: Exploring Moral Choices in Childbearing. By HELEN WATT. Pp. 157. Abingdon: Routledge. 2016. £85.00 (hb). ISBN: 978-1138188082.

This book is the sixteenth volume in the popular *Routledge Annals of Bioethics* series. The author is a former director and now Senior Research Fellow at the Anscombe Bioethics Centre in Oxford and offers here a challenging and seemingly expensive read. However, both her economy of writing and the extensive use of endnotes enable her to encompass more ideas and topics than many books twice the size — the longest chapter has 115 endnotes occupying 20 pages. The irritation of having to having to constantly flick to the end of the chapters to read the footnotes combined with the density of the argument do not make for an easy read but it is a comprehensive, fascinating and ultimately worthwhile one.

In her introduction, Watt states her aim is to primarily explore pregnancy in all its moral aspects but immediately goes on to state that since abortion is the context in which this most frequently occurs, this topic will inevitably be discussed at length as well. Having then re-affirmed her purpose of writing about the ethics of pregnancy rather than the moral status of the fetus, the first chapter *The Uni-Personal Pregnancy* is about the fetus and explores various theories of personhood, dealing with some very familiar issues en route such as twinning and potentiality. Her conclusion that the maternal-fetal dyad is a linking of two human subjects she admits is only the beginning of the ethics of pregnancy and moreover there are many thorny issues involved for those who reject equal status but consider the fetus at least as a significant other. ‘Birth is a change of location, not a change of identity’ (p.35).

The next chapter *The Neighbourly Pregnancy* therefore is the focus to the pregnant woman and the question of what a pregnant woman might reasonably be said to owe the ‘other’ she supports. Starting from Thomson’s ubiquitous ‘kidnapped violinist’ analogy Watt agrees that duties to support others are role-related and that donating a kidney to a stranger is beyond the call of duty. However, she distinguishes duties to avoid harmful bodily invasion as *not* being role-related and therefore contra Thomson, it does not require a splendid Samaritan to refuse to carry out harm which is what abortion intrinsically entails for the fetus.

The third chapter *The Maternal Pregnancy* is by far the longest and following on from discussion of kidnapped violinist analogy, it focuses on the pregnant woman herself by asking whether becoming pregnant in itself makes one a mother rather than a helpful assisting Good Samaritan. Watt commences her exploration by considering the rights conferred upon a woman by virtue of her becoming pregnant. This Watt explores through examination of the case of pregnancy in women rendered unconscious by trauma and in the case of women who

are raped. Though such examples are generally raised as those where abortion may be most justifiable, Watt contends that ‘an abortion in both circumstances would be “a new invasive act, fully avoidable, which would make the woman’s own invaded body the unwitting site of a violent invasion of her child’s.”’ She further argues powerfully that the maternal role cannot *simply* be chosen by those who want to parent a particular child. There are several moving personal accounts from women who have become pregnant through the violation of rape that illustrate this

I believe that to encourage a woman to have an abortion is to add more violence to her life. The fact that she is still alive should give her an added reason to cherish the innocent life growing inside her. Two wrongs will never make a right.

The chapter goes on to consider a seemingly exhaustive array of related topics – pregnancy, control and feeling, control, pregnancy and guardianship, prenatal testing, maternal and materno-fetal treatments in pregnancy and the conflicts that can arise from them, life-threatening pregnancies, ectopic pregnancy and premature delivery. The section on ectopic pregnancy made me uneasy as a former clinician as Watt does seem to have considerable unease ethically about ‘intentional removal of the embryo (with a relatively undamaged tube)’ rather than expectant management or removal when the tube is damaged. However, she recognizes the tenuousness of her own ethical position here in immediately acknowledging that surgical removal at an early stage seems ‘clearly justifiable’ and ‘arguments against it seem well-nigh incomprehensible, in view of the risks this could avoid’ (p.81). Would that all ethicists had such insight and openness about the weakness of their position when out on a precarious ethical limb!

The Spousal Pregnancy, the fourth and final chapter (arguably rather misleadingly titled), looks at the way in which pregnancy affects parenting and society as a whole and considers whether there are morally speaking ‘better and worse ways to begin a pregnancy ... and if so what these ways might be’. In making fetal reduction in multiple pregnancies from IVF her first topic here, Watt makes a convincing case that ‘the “consumerish” attitudes of ART doctors and patients to unborn ART offspring’ [stem from] the ‘consumerish’ structures of ARTs themselves. Not all parents requesting IVF however would contemplate the creation of untransferred embryos, let alone accept fetal reduction and may rightly resist (and feel diminished by) the implication that users of ARTs are merely ‘commissioners of the child-product assembled ... [taking] owner type attitudes towards it’ (p.107). Furthermore parents whose conceive naturally are certainly not immune from those attitudes either!

This final chapter also explores donor pregnancies, ‘embryo adoption’, pregnancy intimacy and sexuality and male support of pregnancy. Watt concludes by claiming that pregnancy tests our commitment to both human equality and to the bodily nature of human moral subjects. Pregnancy though it may be burdensome is not an illness. Pregnancy is maternal. Having two subjects whose relationship is familial. It is to be celebrated and it should be supported even for those for whom it is not a cause for celebration. ‘We should not lose sight of the joy of having children – children seen as a gift, not a product – as we support each other through the obstacles that may cloud or obviate that joy’ (p.122).

Though I suspect few will agree with Watt on every point, she makes her arguments clearly and carefully and within this relatively short volume she explores a wide range of issues some of which I have never seen discussed anywhere else. Most readers will find something to challenge existing views and to stimulate fresh thought about the ethics of pregnancy.

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